

Civil War Book Review

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Co. Aytch: First Tennessee Regiment or a Side Show of the Big Show

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Review

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Watkins, Sam R. and McAllister, Ruth Hill Fulton, ed.. *Co. Aytch: First Tennessee Regiment or a Side Show of the Big Show*. Providence House Publishers, \$34.95 hardcover ISBN 9781577363828

Sam Watkins's Civil War

It is the blackest page in the history of the war of the Lost Cause. It was the bloodiest battle of modern times in any war. It was the finishing stroke to the independence of the Southern Confederacy. I was there. I saw it. My flesh trembles, and creeps, and crawls when I think of it to-day. My heart almost ceases to beat at the horrid recollection. Would to God that I had never witnessed such a scene!...I cannot describe it. It beggars description. I will not attempt to describe it. The death angel was there to gather its last harvest. It was the grand coronation of death Forward, men' is repeated all along the line. A sheet of fire was poured into our very faces, and for a moment we halted as if in despair, as the terrible avalanche of shot and shell laid low those brave and gallant heroes And the blood spurts in a perfect jet from the dead and wounded. The earth is red with blood. It runs in streams, making little rivulets as it flows The death-angel shrieks and laughs and old Father Time is busy with his sickle, as he gathers in the last harvest of death, crying, More, more, more! while his rapacious maw is glutted with the slain (260-62).

Such powerful and dramatic prose has captured the imagination of readers for more than a century, since Sam R. Watkins first wrote the piece to describe his experience at the Battle of Franklin, Tennessee, in 1864. As a soldier in Company H of the First Tennessee Volunteer Infantry Regiment, CSA, Watkins witnessed the panorama of war in grand scale as he marched and fought with the hard luck Confederate Army of Tennessee across the Western Theater. His honest, vivid, and dramatic memoir, first published in the 1880s, is a classic that conveys the horrors, humor, and realism of America's *Iliad*. His passages are still used by filmmakers such as Ken Burns, scholars looking for juicy quotes to spice

up a narrative, and students of the war who want to capture something of the experience of being a private in a Civil War army.

Dozens of editions of Watkins's memoir have been published since its initial publication. Providence House Publishers, however, is now offering an edition that amazingly contains new material and revisions from the hand of the author. Following the first publication of *Co. Aytch*, Watkins intended to rework the book in a second edition, but fate intervened and he passed away before that happened. The revised manuscript remained with the family until Ruth Hill Fulton McAllister, Watkins's great granddaughter, decided to help her ancestor edit and publish his long-awaited second edition. The text contains all of the edits Watkins envisioned as well as forty images. Photos of some of the private's handwritten additions add an aesthetic appeal not found in the original.

In sum, arguably the best Civil War memoir has just gotten even better. McAllister's skillful editing allows the reader to see both the original edition and the revised one. This is a rare opportunity to follow an author's thought processes first hand. This excellent work with its expanded and revised text is a must read for scholars, Civil War enthusiasts, students, and anyone intrigued by the impact of war on the human psyche. There is simply no better way to learn about a historical event than to view it through the eyes of someone who was there.

John D. Fowler is an Associate Professor of History and the Director of the Center for the Study of the Civil War Era at Kennesaw State University. He is the author of Mountaineers in Gray: The Nineteenth Tennessee Volunteer Infantry Regiment, CSA (University of Tennessee Press, 2004) and The Confederate Experience Reader (Routledge Press, 2007). He is completing a study of Tennessee during the Civil War Era.